

**INTERNATIONAL TRADE ADMINISTRATION
COMMUNICATIONS GO TEAM
REPORT TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT STEERING GROUP**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ITA Communications Go Team (the Team) is one of three focus groups created by the Employee Engagement Steering Group (EESG) to examine the sources of—and make recommendations toward addressing—morale issues surrounding: (1) communications; (2) rewards and recognition; and, (3) career development within the International Trade Administration (ITA). These were key areas of concern to ITA leadership in relation to ITA responses to the FY 2006 Human Capital Survey conducted by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM).

Low ITA survey scores to six communications-related questions in the survey revealed that communications challenges within ITA appear to be having profound, negative effects on employee morale. The responses further suggested that communication issues may be limiting ITA employees from performing their duties to their fullest potential and perhaps discouraging them from seeking long-term careers within ITA. The most-important—but positive—news from the Team’s work is that it believes that employees and management, working together as a team, can build more open communications in both vertical and horizontal directions at minimal costs. The strong management and staff representations in the survey results make such a collaborative response—one that addresses the needs and resources of both staff and managers—even more imperative. Further, the Team is confident that small steps will make a *big difference* in existing communications gaps. At a deeper level, the Team seeks to encourage the greater flow of knowledge, trust, and information within ITA communications, which would help foster team building—and ultimately higher morale—in ITA.

The Team, which consisted of 18 members (both managers and staff) from headquarters and the field and across ITA units, took an honest, self-examination of the issues over four months. It did not look for specific individuals or groups that may bear responsibility for ITA communications concerns. Instead, it sought to understand the root causes of the concerns and to develop some approaches to help ITA to address them. To accomplish this, the Team: (1) brainstormed to determine the scope and definition of communications; (2) determined the most-pressing communications gaps linked to the low communications survey scores; (3) developed short and long term recommendations, and, (4) created a "Next Phase" roadmap that would enable the Team to undertake immediate activities that would foster team building and an awareness of the importance of communications within the ITA community.

Interestingly, the Team was not convinced that there is “too much” information within ITA, although there certainly is a vast amount of communications that managers and staff have to respond to on any given day. Instead, the Team was unanimous in its belief that ITA needs to develop strategies to enable staff to: (1) understand the universe of communications taking place; (2) understand, and have easy access to, the communications needed for them to conduct their work; and (3) seek assistance in the communications breakdowns that may be occurring. Perhaps “getting a better handle” on information and encouraging more open, and smarter, communications best summarized the Team’s feelings on how ITA can improve scores on the survey’s communications questions.

The Team identified five of the most pressing communications concerns by ITA staff and managers. First, staff across ITA programs find it difficult to manage the demands created by multiple communications from ITA's external and internal stakeholders. They report not being fully aware of

the host of mechanisms (some traditional, others technology-based) within which these communications take place, and how they may tap into the ones most-relevant to their specific work and communications style. The Team found that many employees and managers reported that some kind of communications strategy would help staff to "connect the dots" and more effectively stay on top of issues relevant to them. Second, staff across units reported an absence of clearly-defined and consistently articulated ITA policies and program priorities. Some staff, for example, reported significant variances in staff meetings (one per week versus one per year) where such top-down priorities are communicated by managers to staff. Different programs also interpreted policies and priorities in different fashions.

Thirdly, it was emphasized that there is no current systematic chronicling ITA meetings, both domestic and abroad, and the substantive content/outcomes of those meetings. Useful mechanisms could enable ITA staff to "connect the dots" better and engage issue follow-up to minimize duplication and optimize subsequent policy advancement with ITA's external and internal stakeholders. Fourthly, the Team concluded that there are some disconnects between ITA (namely US&FCS) field offices and headquarters officials that challenge the field offices' ability to meet expectations on the part of senior HQ officials. Finally, it was reported that some ITA offices and individuals are more transparent than others, and others withhold information at the expense of the broader ITA community.

Recommendations

The Team concluded that the following short and long term recommendations could help ITA address each of these concerns.

Short-Term

- **Empower the GO Team to become the communication task force and lead the charge**
 - Leadership sponsors;
 - Walk-the-talk;
 - Inventory of gaps;
 - Tip-of-the-month;
 - Questions/vote
 - Find and use of communication champions;
 - Communications corner; and
 - Sharing best practices and benchmark survey results.
- **Launch "From C to Shining C" campaign to improve ITA communications (C)**
- **Create "Hall of Fame" to highlight strong ITA communicators and identify communicators of the month as part of best practice sharing**
- **Use existing best practices to build momentum**
 - Mechanisms to facilitate vertical and horizontal communication

Long-Term

- **Work with program leadership to build and implement program specific communications strategies (knowing that one size does not fit all)**
- **Use effective mechanisms at various organization levels to create a more open, trusting and transparent environment**
 - Communities of Interest
 - On-line culture (Intranet and Web Presence)
 - Team building (retreats, off-sites, celebrations)
 - Elements in everybody's performance plan

Additional Recommendations

- Undertake steps to mitigate fears employees may have about communicating issues to their management, and vice versa.
- Create a "communications ombudsman" as resource for employees that aren't able to resolve concerns directly with supervisors.
- Consider including communications components to managers' performance reviews and some kind of 360 degree staff review of managers.
- Undertake steps to ensure that top-down and horizontal communications, in whatever form preferred by managers and staff is taking place on a regular basis.

Next Steps "GO" Phase

The Team is eager to enter a Next Steps Phase that would enable the Team to move its work into a "GO," or implementation, phase, which should include a communication improvement strategy.

Conclusion

The Communications Go Team seeks the EESG's and senior leadership's adoption of its recommendations, which could go a long way to create a more open and transparent environment and culture that is more conducive to stronger communications.

**GO TEAM REPORT-STRENGTHENING COMMUNICATIONS
WITHIN THE ITA COMMUNITY**

Effective communications is an essential component of organizational success, whether it is at the interpersonal, intergroup, intragroup, organizational, or external levels. Its centrality to organizational success cannot be overemphasized. Communications is a process of transmitting information, ideas, thoughts, opinions and plans between various parts of an organization. The breakdown of communications can lead to low morale, low productivity, and, ultimately, higher levels of turnover. The FY 2006 OPM Human Capital Survey revealed that communications gaps within the International Trade Administration are having profound, negative impacts on employee morale, particularly at the staff level, but also at the team lead/managerial level as well.

Low scores on the relevant survey questions, listed below, illustrate the magnitude of this challenge within ITA:

- (3) I have enough information to do my job well.
- (39) Managers communicate the goals and priorities of the organization.
- (46) I can disclose a suspected violation of any law, rule or regulation without fear of reprisal.
- (51) Managers promote communication among different work units (for example, about projects, goals, and needed resources).
- (52) Employees in my work unit share job knowledge with each other.
- (55) How satisfied are you with the information you receive from management on what's going on in your organization?

Given the challenges open communications can be between two individuals, it may not be such a surprise that an organization of ITA's size, with over 2,000 employees, experiences some degree of communications obstacles. Moreover, the complex nature of ITA's work itself lends the organization vulnerable to these challenges. On any given day, at an external level, ITA managers and staff must advance their priorities through an intricate host of constituencies, including U.S. businesses, Congress, other USG agencies, and foreign governments. Within the organization, the ITA employees must communicate with a host of internal constituencies (colleagues, supervisors and staff) via a number of communications instruments (in person, via email, via telephone) and both vertical and horizontal directions.

Even with these institutional challenges, the ITA Communications Go Team (the Team) is optimistic that staff and management can work together to confront the communications roadblocks facing the ITA community. The Team, which consisted of 18 members (both managers and staff) from headquarters and the field and each ITA unit (MAC, MAS, FCS, IA), took an honest, self examination of the issues over four months. It met formally five times between October 2007 and January 2008, but conducted numerous informal exchanges via email, telephone conversations, and one-on-one meetings with work colleagues and managers.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that the Team did not look for specific individuals or groups that may bear responsibility for ITA communications concerns. Instead, it sought to understand the root causes of these concerns and to develop some approaches to help ITA to address them. To accomplish this, the Team: (1) brainstormed to determine the scope and definition of communications; (2) determined the communications gaps that were linked to the low

communications Survey scores; and (3) developed short and long term recommendations. Finally, the Team developed a "Next Phase" roadmap to implement these recommendations at a minimal cost to the organization. Each of these steps of the Team's work is explored below.

I. DEFINING COMMUNICATIONS AND ITS SCOPE: TYPES, FORMS & FLOWS

At the outset, the Team recognized that it needed to identify the sources of ITA's communications problems before attempting to construct recommendations to address them. In order to do this, the Team first concluded that it had to define and establish a "scope" for what is meant by "communications." This was in somewhat of a contrast to the other two Go Teams, whose mandates were more clearly defined. The Communications Go Team, at the onset of its work, quickly concluded that it must identify: (1) the various types of communications ITA staff engage in; (2) the forms in which such communications take place; (3) the directions within which communications flows; and, (4) where breakdowns appear to be occurring within these different levels. This brainstorming and defining of communications was critical to identify the most pressing communications roadblocks and developing recommendations to address them.

A. Communications Types

Communications serves an almost infinite number of purposes in our daily lives, including: seeking information; conveying information; seeking help; helping others; coordinating with others; giving reports on projects; enhancing understanding; clarifying one's position; establishing and disseminating organizational goals; developing plans for achieving organizational goal achievement; motivating members; analyzing policies and data; and, advancing policy positions. Team members noted that some communications can be substantive, while others can amount to "chatter." This determination, of course, is a subjective matter. Nonetheless, the Team concluded that it is as an important challenge that ITA staff regularly face in prioritizing the types of communications they must engage in on any given day. The Team noted some kind of ITA Communications Strategy would help staff "connect the dots"

B. Communications Forms

Communications, regardless of type, is transmitted through an increasing number of channels. At one level, there are traditional forms (direct one-on-one, telephone conversations, meetings, and larger group meetings). This first level includes written communications (memos and reports). Modern technology, however, has reshaped how we communicate and has created the mechanisms by which much of our daily communications take place. Email, for example is a prime source of communications, as is the ITA Intranet and Internet. It was noted in Team meetings that ITA staff may be oriented toward different forms of communications. Younger staff, for example, may be more comfortable and inclined to use technology to communicate, while older staff, at least in some cases, may prefer traditional forms of communications (one on one, telephone, reports, and memos) that were the mainstay of communications in years past. The Team noted that the individual, unique employee-by-employee orientation toward traditional, modern communications, or both, can shape the perceptions they have about the adequacy (or lack thereof) of their communications experiences within ITA.

C. Communications Flows

All communications, regardless of their type and mechanism of transmission, travel in essentially two “directional” flows—vertical and horizontal. Vertical communications consist of superior – subordinate communications and, vice versa, subordinate–superior communications. Horizontal communications, in contrast, is an interactive communication between individuals within a unit, across units, or across agencies.

II. KEY AREAS OF CONCERN

With this framework established, the Team concluded that the following concerns are the most important for the Team to address in its recommendations.

A. Managing Multiple Communications Demands

First, staff across units reported the challenge they face in managing the many communications flows taking place among ITA's external and internal stakeholders. ITA's size and organizational complexities, in addition to any number of human factors, make the organization ripe for communications roadblocks. Further, the daunting array (and in some cases duplication) of communications, both electronic and human, are contributing to staff morale problems.

The reality is that ITA staff and managers on any given day face a host of mechanisms (some traditional, others technology-based) within which these communications take place. Some employees, it was noted, prefer more traditional (direct, one-on-one) communications, while others are more oriented toward technology-based communications. The Team concluded that the first, most pressing priority for ITA is to create a Communications Strategy that will help educate staff on the evolving forms of communications and how to tap into the forms that most fit their unique orientations toward specific communications forms. More importantly, such a strategy could help to ensure that ITA staff and managers have the most accurate, up-to-date information on policy priorities, trade issues, and other types of information communicated to them through multiple mechanisms.

B. Dissemination of ITA Policy Priorities

Secondly, the Team also concluded that rank and file staff across ITA units report an absence of clearly-defined and articulated ITA policies and program priorities. A significant number of staff reported that they are only able to obtain such information through the press, weekly highlights, and occasional meetings. The all-hands meetings ITA holds were deemed to be too vague and held too infrequently to be effective at communicating policy and program priorities. There is substantial variation in communications throughout the organization, for example, some ITA offices have regular (one a week) staff meetings, while others have them only once each year. Addressing this issue would be the second priority of the Team.

C. Reporting on Meetings & Official Travel

Thirdly, the Team identified the absence of a systematic reporting of Commerce meetings, both domestically and abroad, as a priority concern. On any given day, at an external level, ITA managers and staff must advance their priorities through an intricate host of constituencies, including U.S. businesses, Congress, other USG agencies, and foreign governments. Within the organization, the ITA employees communicate with a host of internal constituencies (colleagues, supervisors and staff) via a number of communications instruments (in person, via email, via telephone) and both vertical and horizontal directions.

The absences of a centralized list of these meetings, and synopsis of what was (and wasn't) communicated (and not communicated) in these meetings results in an inability for ITA staff to be able to understand the latest state-of-play of particular issues and the appropriate staff-level follow-up or next steps. Further, the absence of a central listing of such meetings and program/policy initiatives can result in both misdirected and/or redundant ITA communications of policy messages and internal tasking. The Go Team identified it to be critical that staff know "how the policy and program dots connect" in order to advance their particular roles within ITA.

D. Lack of Communications between ITA HQ & Field Offices/Embassies

Fourthly, the Team, which consisted of five ITA field and embassy staff, emphasized a gap in communications between HQ and their offices. Specifically, it was reported that HQ staff do not spend enough time getting to know the field staff, except for specific tasking of meetings/trips. This has practical implications; in addition to the obvious disconnect that field staff feel. The absence of closer HQ relationship-building with field staff can place significant burdens in their ability to meet expectations from HQ staff when calling upon these offices to create events and trips for such officials. It was also reported the investment of more direct, face-to-face time on the part of senior ITA management would strengthen their understanding of field offices and their resources and expertise to meet HQ expectations.

E. Trust, Transparency & Information Sharing Within & Between Offices

Finally, the Team reported that information is commonly withheld within offices and between offices. The Team, through its extended discussions with staff across units, reported hearing that some managers do not update their staffs on the results of meetings with senior ITA staff. ITA staff also reported that some managers appear to favor individuals and provide them with more information and offer greater levels of opportunities to grow professionally and to meet ITA benchmarks. It was also reported that some staff and managers do not communicate with the appropriate units within ITA about issues and meetings relating to issues where multiple ITA units are involved.

III. NEXT STEPS "GO" IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

The Team is eager to enter a Next Steps Phase that would enable the Team to move its work into a "GO," or implementation, phase, which could include a communication improvement strategy.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-Term

- 1) **Empower the GO Team to become the ITA Communication Task Force and lead the charge.**
 - Formally allow Go Team to enter "Go", or implementation, phase.
 - Membership should include ITA leadership sponsors and Communications Go Team members wishing to continue service on Task Force.
 - Task Force will:
 - work with senior management to encourage a more systemic dissemination of policy and program priorities in a flexible manner that minimizes costs to management's time.
 - work with senior management and ITA Intranet Team to create an intranet repository that lists all non-classified/confidential ITA industry and policy briefs, issue papers, meeting reports and foreign travel reports.
 - explore ways that managers and staff to report the basic substance of meetings and issue status. Encourage flexibility (in length and style) of such reporting and reasonable deadlines for such reporting to take place.
 - serve as "Communications Friend" to offer guidance and support for staff struggling with communications roadblocks
- 2) **Launch "From C to Shining C" campaign to improve ITA communications (C).**
 - Conduct kickoff events, summer of 2008, to celebrate ITA C to Shining C Campaign in informal (e.g. barbeque) setting(s).
 - Campaign will:
 - strengthen transparency and information sharing within and between offices by creating a culture of involvement and engagement.
 - encourage greater dissemination of information and transparency.
 - use communications champions to get staff psyched up!
 - create driving performance mechanisms, including written statements/standards in performance plans to encourage communications.
 - include senior-level HQ "get to know" visits to FCS field offices to understand their particular work.
 - create opportunities for field staff to visit/complete assignments in HQ and vice versa to foster HQ-field ties.
 - create monthly ITA HQ-Field Office digital video conferences (DVCs) to encourage communications (both ways).
 - advance the concept of "ITA Citizens."
- 3) **Create "Hall of Fame" to highlight strong ITA "best practices" communicators.**
 - Use activities, posters, and ITA Intranet to identify "communications champions" within the ITA community whose communications "best practices" can be recognized and emulated by broader community.
 - Create "Communicator of the Month" to recognize ITA staff.

- Create "Communications of the Month" to recognize activities within the organization (both high profile and "under the radar") that demonstrate strong communications.
- Recognize "every day" ITA staffers that demonstrate strong communications (oral or written) skills.

Long-Term

- 1) **Enable Team to work with senior ITA leadership to develop ITA Communications Strategy that addresses challenges and needs of each programmatic unit.**
- Strategy would give staff a roadmap for understanding the information sources available to them.
 - Reduce likelihood of duplication of policy messages and meetings.
 - Increase likelihood that staff will have easy access to latest information relating to their mandates and larger departmental policies.
 - Closely monitors, and reports to senior leadership, results and feedback from short term strategies, above.

Next Steps Phase

- 1) **Enable the Team to move its work into a "GO," or implementation, phase.**
- 2) **Team reports back to EESG in a year on progress and results.**

"If not us, who? If not now, when?" --John F. Kennedy